Voter Registration Modernization

What is Voter Registration Modernization?

Voter registration modernization is a general term used to describe a series of reforms states can and should make to change the way they register people to vote. Many current voter registration systems in the United States are outdated, unnecessarily expensive, inefficient, and often responsible for disenfranchising many otherwise eligible citizens. Individuals often miss registration deadlines they were unaware of, which leaves them unable to cast a ballot. Relying on paper based registration often leads to data entry errors when election workers try to read an individual's handwriting. By relying on outdated registration systems and voter registration deadlines, states are more likely to have errors in voter information and citizens who are left off of the voting rolls.

The suggested changes, outlined below, are meant to fix these problems by making voter registration more convenient, simple, and secure, while placing the burden of registering and updating registrations on the state instead of the individual voter.

Online Registration

Transitioning away from paper registration and to an online registration system is the first step states should take in modernizing their voter registration process. In 2015, 21 states offer online voter registration and another six states and D.C. have passed legislation authorizing online registration, but have not implemented systems yet. With over half the states embracing online voter registration.[1]

Online voter registration offer several benefits to registrars and voters. These systems can easily be built, deployed, and maintained. They also allow voters to register in a timely and convenient way, minimizing data entry errors which can lead to frustration on Election Day. Online voter registration saves money and resources for the state; the cost of processing an application in Arizona fell from 83 cents per application to just 3 cents with the online system.[2]

Traditionally, online voter registration systems use the signature voters have on file with the state motor vehicle agency for voter registration purposes. This signature requirement limits online voter registration to those who have a driver's license or state non-driver's identification card. To expand the reach of online voter registration, states could build an online system which uses online signatures for those that have them on file with a state agency, while also allowing those who do not to provide a signature the first time they vote.

Automatic Updates to Registration

Voters who move or change their name, which is common after marriage or divorce, often incorrectly assume the post office or DMV will update their voter registration information. Currently, the burden is almost always on the voter to keep his or her registration information up to date, even when the state has been informed that their name or address has been changed in another context. A modern voter registration system should update voter information when a voter contacts the state with a change to their name or address for any reason.

Oregon became the first state to implement automatic voter registration in 2015.[3] The new system switches the traditional opt-in process for voter registration at the Department of Transportation to an opt-out system. This shifts the majority of the effort in maintaining up-to-date voter rolls from the individual voters to the state. Several other states are now considering whether to adopt similar automatic registration systems.

Allowing agencies and others within the state to streamline updates for voter registration ensures that voters who have taken the time to register to vote are not inadvertently disenfranchised when they move or change their name. These updates should also allow registration to "travel" with the voter when they move jurisdictions.

Failsafe Measures to Ensure Voters Aren't Disenfranchised

While voter registration modernization seeks to improve and streamline the registration process, no system is perfect. In order to ensure eligible citizens are not disenfranchised, it is crucial for a state to adopt fail-safe mechanisms that allow eligible citizens to provide information that is required and then cast a regular or provisional ballot that will ultimately be counted.

For more on fail-safe measures, see FELN's Guide to Voter Registration Fail Safe Measures at www.fairelectionsnetwork.com/resources/issue-briefs.

Voter Registration Modernization is an important step for states to take to ensure their voting system is convenient, cost effective, and truly serves the state's voting population. Through implementing these common-sense election law changes, states can reduce many of the current barriers to voting and ensure a robust democracy.

Sources and Additional Reading

[1] National Conference of State Legislatures, "Online Voter Registration", available at http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/electronic-or-online-voter-registration.aspx.
[2] Pew Charitable Trusts, "Case Studies in Online Voter Registration," available at http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/0001/01/01/online-voter-registration.
[3] https://olis.leg.state.or.us/liz/2015R1/Measures/Overview/HB2177.

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